

Asea in Arkadia

A Case of Site Abandonment and Population Movement¹

Ancient Asea was first given a place in modern bibliography by Colonel Leake (1830)². Since then and until the short visit of Eric Holmberg in the 1930's the site and particularly the fortified hill of Paleokastro had been considered the site of the classical city of Asea as well as the Asea of the Achaian League. As the process of excavation continued however this conception proved mistaken; the Swedish archaeologist noticed that immediately below the Hellenistic strata came the Middle Helladic level. Hence the site of Classical Asea remains unidentified. The integration of geological, topographical, archaeological and literary evidence presented here will show that the classical city of Asea is not to be found in the immediate vicinity of the Hellenistic site. In fact we propose that a series of site abandonments and population movements have changed the location of the main settlement thrice in the period between 300 B.C. and 200 A.D.

¹ The study of historical topography in general, and of the Asean Plain in particular, attracts many hardships. Throughout the long term of Asean *periegesis* several friends and colleagues have stood loyal to the task. In the more recent of my walks on Asean grounds assistance was provided by Mrs Eleni Katsioli, and by Mr Ioannes Kh. Dhrakopoulos of Loyola University. Our guide and host into the area was Mr Konstantinos Lampropoulos retired *komogrammateus* of the Community. From this forum, once again, I express my gratitude.

² Brief and indecisive comments have been made by modern travellers mainly on the visible fortifications. In general consult: W. GELL, *Itinerary of the Morea*, London, 1810, p. 137; J.C. FRAZER, *Pausanias Description of Greece*, London, 1817, p. 414-415; W.M. LEAKE, *Travels in the Morea*, London, 1830, p. 83, and by the same author *Peloponnesiaca: A Supplement to Travels in the Morea*, London, 1846, p. 247; *Expedition Scientifique de Moree*, Paris, 1831-1838, p. 406; L. ROSS, *Wanderungen in Griechenland im Gefolge des Königs Otto und der Königin Amalie mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Topographie und Geschichte*, Halle, 1848, p. 223; Er. CURTIUS, *Peloponnesos. Eine historisch-geographische Beschreibung der Halbinsel*, Gotha, 1851-1852, p. 266; C. BURSIA, *Geographie von Griechenland*, v. II, Leipzig, 1872, p. 226-227; W. LORING, *Some Ancient Routes in the Peloponnese*, in *JHS*, 15 (1895), p. 25-89; H. HITZIG and H. BLUMNER, *Pausaniae Graeciae descriptio*, Leipzig, 1899-1907, p. 278-279; W.K. PRITCHETT, *Studies in Ancient Greek Topography*, IV, Berkeley, 1982, p. 61-63; M. JOST, *Sanctuaires et cultes d'Arcadie*, Paris, 1985, p. 195; Y. PILOUKAS, 'Η Νότια Μεγαλοπολιτική Χώρα, Athens, 1988, p. 53 ff.; El. DRAKOPOULOS, *Aseatis: The Historical Topography of the Plain of Asea, Miscelanea Hellenica*, Athens, 1992.

Classical Asea

The existence of classical Asea is a historical fact. By virtue of its position it dominated the high plain between the lower Megalopolitan and the upper Tegean from the Neolithic Period to the Byzantine Era. It was the Arkadian presence a breath away from Spartan territorial advance. While Eutaia on the southern tip of the plain and Oresthasion³ on the eastern slopes of Mt. Tsemerou represented at times the eternal Lakedaemonian wish for domination over mountainous Arkadia, Asea remained an obstacle to those plans keeping its Arkadian identity down to a fervent participation in the Achaian League.

Ancient testimony on the historical role of classical Asea is limited but explicit. We know that the Arkadians gathered on Asean ground to prepare for war against Aghisilaos – καὶ οὕτω στρατεύουσιν ἐπὶ τοὺς Μαντινέας, ὥς παρὰ τοὺς ὄρκους σὺν ὅπλοις ἐληλυθότων αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τοὺς Τεγεάτας ... Ἀγισίλαον δ' ἐκέλευεν ἡ πόλις ἡγεῖσθαι. οἱ μὲν οὖν ἄλλοι Ἀρκάδες εἰς Ἀσέαν συνελέγοντο (Xenophon, *Hellenika*, VI, 5, 11-15)⁴. The Spartan invasion force thought best to prepare the fortifications of Eutaia against what we must have been a threat for them; a fact that implies the existence of a well sized Asea, on the other side of the plain.

It is also known that the Aseans were on the side of the Boiotian Epaminondas when he invaded Spartan territory – Ἐπαμεινώνδας ἐλογίζετο καὶ ἐν Πελοποννήσῳ σφίσιν ὑπάρχειν Ἀργείους τε καὶ Μεσσηνίους καὶ Ἀρκάδων τοὺς τὰ σφέτερα φρονούντας ἦσαν δ' οὗτοι Τεγεᾶται καὶ Μεγαλοπολίται καὶ Ἀσεᾶται ... (Xenophon, *Hellenika*, VII, 5, 4-8)⁵. The Boiotian general counted, it seems, heavily on the support of certain cities in the Peloponnesos one of which was Asea; another element suggesting the presence of a strong Asean city.

In 370 B.C. the Aseans contributed man power to the creation and to the eventual settlement of the city of Megalopolis – πόλεις δὲ τοσαῖδε ἦσαν ὅσας ὑπὸ τε προθυμίας καὶ διὰ τὸ ἔχθος τὸ Λακεδαιμονίων πατρίδας σφίσιν οὔσας ἐκλιπεῖν ἐπείθοντο οἱ Ἀρκάδες Ἀλέα, Παλλάντιον, Εὐταία, Σουμάτειον, Ἀσέα ... (Pausanias, VIII, 7, 3)⁶. This was done apparently without endangering the status of their city which continued to mint its own coinage and to even participate, a few decades later, in the Achaian League.

³ We have identified the intermediate area between the chapels of Ayia Triadha, Aghios Ioannes and Aghios Yianakis on the eastern slopes of Mt. Tsemerou as the site of ancient Oresthasion (HERODOTOS, IX, 11; PAUSANIAS, VII, 44, 2; THUCYDIDES, V, 64) see EL. DRAKOPOULOS, *Orestheum or Oresthasion in Arcadia*, in *L'Antiquité Classique*, 61 (1991), and by the same author, *Some Additional Comments on the Matter of Oresthasion*, in *L'Antiquité Classique*, 62 (1992).

⁴ «So the Lakedaemonians decided to make an expedition against the Mantineians because they had violated their oaths and had taken arms against the Tegeans... The state then directed Aghisilaos to take command. At that time most of the Arkadians were gathering at Asea» (author's translation).

⁵ «... Epaminondas pushed forth since as he saw it he had supporters in the Peloponnesos... these were the Tegeans, the Megalopolitans, the Aseans...» (author's translation).

⁶ «The following were the cities which the Arkadians were persuaded to abandon through their zeal and because of their hatred for the Lakedaemonians, in spite of the fact that these cities were their homes : Alea, Pallantion, Eutaia, Sumateion, Asea ...» (author's translation).



Map 1, Scale 1/25 000

1. The Hill of Paleokastro; Site of Hellenistic Asea; 2. Village of Asea; formerly Kantreva; 3. Hill of Roupakia; 4. Voreion Oros/Ayios Elias; 5. Site of Ayios Nikolaos; 6a-6b. Chimiza; π Panayitsas Rhema; ---- Megalopolis-Tripolis National Road; ≠ = Rail-Road Tracks.

Hellenistic Asea

The Hellenistic akropolis of Asea is situated on a hill-top found among the last natural terraces of the Ai Lias/Voreion Oros mountain. The akropolis hill is part of a pocket of limestone and flysch erected by tectonic movement between the alluvium deposit of the plain and the flysch mass of Ai Lias/Voreion Oros.

To the south and east of the hill passes the Alpheios river, whose flow is but the ground movement of a greater subterranean current generated at the Frankovrysi basin and running in a southerly direction through the Plain of Asea and into the Plain of Megalopolis to the west. To the north, north-west of the Asean akropolis rises Voreion Oros (1100 m), itself part of the Mainalos range consisting mainly of Mesozoic and Miocene limestone and flysch of the Tripolis zone. The Plain is mainly the result of a large alluvium deposit located at the edge of a fault front. The Gravari Mountain (900 m) rises to the east of Asea and consists primarily of limestone of the Olonos-Pindos zone.



As the cross section shows the inhabitants of Asea had a natural limit to consider in their settlement expansion, as that was conceived and executed apparently in early Hellenistic times; that of the swampy plain reaching the slopes of their akropolis. In such a case, the flysch-limestone mixture to the north offers a fine solution for a communal expansion or resettlement⁷.

Pausanias (VIII, 44, 3)⁸ described the «ruins» of Asea as he passed through the Plain via the road Megalopolis-Pallantion. We may be certain that the akropolis he mentioned is the hill⁹ of Palaeokastro twenty stades, as he wrote, from the town of Athenaeon. We placed the site of ancient Athenaeon at the hill of Ayios Yeoryios with its fullest extent reaching the chapel of Ayios Panteleimon a distance of approximately twenty stades to the west of the Palaeokastro hill⁹.

The excavations of Eric J. Holmberg were directed to the prehistoric settlement on the plateau of the akropolis¹⁰. As far as Hellenistic Asea was concerned the Swedish team examined the fortifications and the area around the hill in an effort, it seems, to identify the site of the cemetery along with other remains. The Hellenistic burial site was not found although several experimental pits were dug on the plateau bringing into light the foundations of private and public buildings from the Hellenistic period. The study of the excavated artifacts gave a *terminus post quem* for Hellenistic Asea of early 1st century A.D.

Even if Holmberg's finds and their chronology are to be disputed, the walls are there to attest the site's chronology. The walling system can best be described as pseudo-isodomic and only as such¹¹ (Plates 1 and 2).

⁷ Holmberg believed that two chronologically different settlements existed on and around the akropolis in Hellenistic times. «From the above-described remains» he concluded «on the hill of Asea and at its foot, we have formed a bare but in the main clear idea of what the settlement was like... the settlement seems to be limited to the area enclosed within the walls» (1994, p. 172). As far as how permanent the settlement was, Holmberg suggested that the main community of the Aseans was located to the north of the akropolis away from the marshland of the plain. During the 3rd century B.C. the inhabitants fortified the hill making it their akropolis. The hill soon attracted more settlers and the community expanded around the hill. That was the cause of the second fortification walls which were erected, according to Holmberg, at a later part of the 3rd century.

⁸ «About twenty stadia away from Athenaeon are the ruins of Asea and the hill that once was the akropolis has traces of fortifications to this day» (author's translation).

⁹ El. DRAKOPOULOS, Aseatis cf. Athenaeon.

¹⁰ The account of the excavation process together with limited information on the Hellenistic artifacts was published in E.J. HOLMBERG : *Excavations at Asea in Arcadia 1936-1938, Preliminary Report*, Gotemborg, 1939, and in the *Swedish Excavations at Asea in Arcadia* (Lund, 1944). The presentation of the Hellenistic material and specifically of the pottery fragments was unsatisfactory. This proved to be a great loss since most of the finds are now missing from their designated place of storage. In recent correspondence with Prof. Holmberg (Sept., 1992) I was given the impression that a new archaeological expedition is being planned by a Swedish team. As I understand a survey will be made of the Helladic strata, the Hellenistic not being in the itinerary. The expedition is surely a welcomed turn of events for Asean studies.

¹¹ HOLMBERG (1944), p. 134, named them pseudo-isodomic; PUILLO, BOBLAYE – *Recherches géographiques sur les ruines de la Moree* (Paris, 1836) – recorded them as polygonal p. 173; Leake (1830) calls them «of the third order», I p. 53; PIKOULAS (1988)

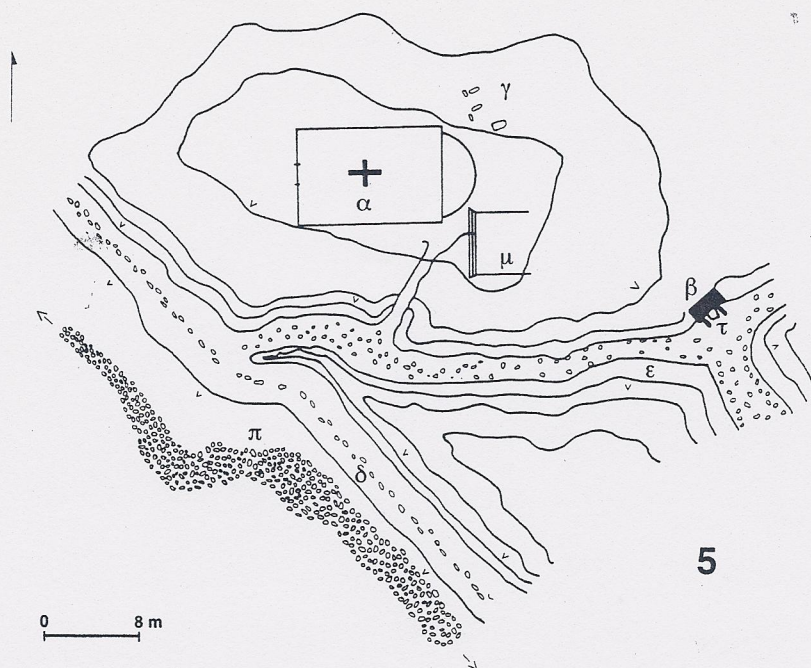


Fig. 2

5. site location on Map 2;

μ = cement plaque

β = fountain (Vrysi)

π = Panayitsas Rhema

ε = Byzantine burial

α = chapel of Ayios Nikolaos

γ = remains of ancient burial

τ = ancient burial

δ = road (unpaved)

> = contour depression

When the defensive urgency of the Hellenistic period gave way to the relative peace of the Roman Era the inhabitants ended whatever care they had shown to the fortifications of their akropolis turning their attention possibly to the community at the site we have decided to record as 6a-6b (Map 1).

Roman Asea

Three km north north-west of Hellenistic Asea in an area the locals call Chimiza there is the chapel of Ayios Nikolaos¹². The chapel is on a low hill which is an extension of the Roupakia hill (Map 1, Fig. 2). Fifty meters to the south-east of the chapel begins an axis of about 100 meters length with sherds and tiles of Roman date. At a private field seventeen meters to the south-east of the chapel's court-yard a structure resembling – from what information was given to us – a

provides no new information p. 53-57; consult : A.W. LAWRENCE, *Greek Aims in Fortification*, Oxford, 1979; R.L. SCRANTON, *Greek Walls*, Cambridge, 1941; F.E. WINTER, *Greek Fortifications*, Toronto, 1971 and especially D.W. ROLLER, *The Date of the Walls of Tanagra*, in *Hesperia*, 43, p. 260-263.

¹² Holmberg hinted of knowing the area but gave no information about it (1944, p. 182). PIKOULAS (1988) calls it «a Roman site of limited size and importance» (p. 61).

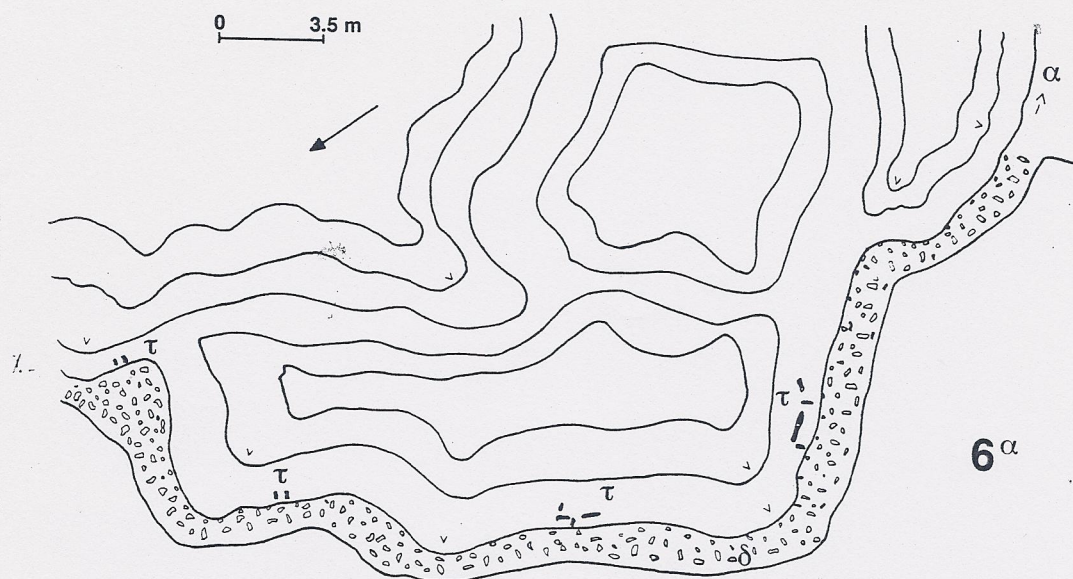


Fig. 3.

6a = Site location on Map 2

δ = path

χ = to 6b

> = Contour depression

τ = Remains of ancient burial

α = to Ayios Nikolaos

Byzantine burial was destroyed by tractor in 1983. Ten meters from the court-yard there exists a fountain (Vrysi) from which the locals water their animals. The limestone structure of the Vrysi rests entirely on an ancient burial (Fig. 2).

North-west of the chapel illegal excavations brought to light a burial site (position 6a on Map 1) with graves bearing an E-W orientation (Fig. 3).

The site had been solicited, according to local information, in 1984¹³. Immediately to the north and east of the burial site sherds¹⁴ of Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine date can be seen (position 6b) in the company of a few also exposed burials (Fig. 4).

¹³ PIKOULAS (p. 62 ff.) briefly describes a spot similar to site 6a but produces no signs of having identified site 6b. His next area of survey was Paliochora, 8 km to the north of 6a.

¹⁴ The chronology of local ceramics presented us with some difficulty. The Roman ware remain however fairly typical in slip. Of particular help was: M.H. MUNN and M.L. ZIMMERMANN MUNN, *Studies on the Attic-Boiotian Frontier: The Stanford Skourta Plain Project, 1985*, in *Beotia Antiqua*, I; *Papers on Recent Work in Boiotian Archaeology and History*, John M. FOSSEY, ed., Amsterdam, 1989, p. 3-127; detailed catalogue of pottery finds, p. 83 ff. For general characteristics, often not applicable in the Asean case, consult: H.S. ROBINSON, *The Athenian Agora*, vol. V, *Pottery of the Roman Period*, Chronology, Princeton, 1959.

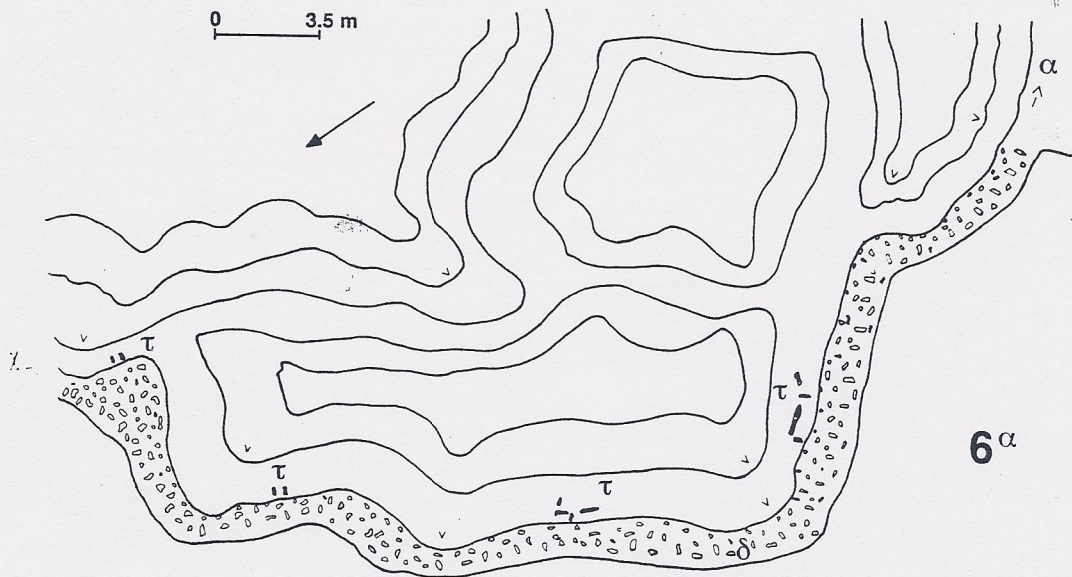


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In the movement of its inhabitants many factors must have played a role¹⁵. One fact is certain however, the Plain with its periodic antihygienic transformation to a marsh-land, record shows, has forced local inhabitants to seek shelter on higher ground. At the end of the 1st century A.D. the Voreion Oros/ Aghios Elias Mountain proved an attractive, indeed the only, possibility for a resettlement. The Chimiza area must have assumed the character of a strictly agricultural site being near the cultivated parts of the Plain yet far enough to prevent the advance of malaria among its populace. In present times the inhabitants of Asea have established their village in the 16th century of our era in the midst of uncertain times, under Turkish occupation, and under the fear of malaria from the Plain below. In 1943 the resistance forces in the midst again of foreign occupation succeeded in draining the Plain. Since then the community of Kato Asea has sprung up directly below the Paleokastro Hill. Throughout these hard centuries all the families of Asea kept their fields on the Plain below, making the short trip to the «kampos» every day in cold and heat. Why would it be difficult for the ancients to have done the same ?

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¹⁵ For parallel information on similar occurrences consult : D.R. KELLER, *Classical Greek Agricultural Sites : The Karystian Evidence*; R. MARTIN, *Rapports entre les structures urbaines et les modes de division et d'exploitation du territoire*, in *Problèmes de la terre en Grèce ancienne*, Paris, 1973, p. 97-112; M. PETROPOULAKOU and E. PENTAZOS, *Αττική, Οικιστικά στοιχεία πρώτη εκθεση*, Athens, 1973; ROWLANDS, MOGENS, and KRISTIANSEN, *Centre and Periphery in the Ancient World* (1987).